

Natural Systems

Introduction

Artist film is a field that I began to explore on my undergraduate degree and further investigated during postgraduate study at the Royal College of Art (RCA). At the RCA, a significant influence on my practice was the late Al Rees, a prominent theorist of experimental art film whose weekly film seminars were a highlight of my time at the college.¹ Al would show TV commercials, music videos, and clips from feature films alongside artist film. The emphasis was always on experimental aspects of the works. On one occasion, Al screened a supermarket advert, which showed conchiglie pasta shells singing Italian opera in a highly amusing manner, next to a classic late sixties conceptual art film, without a second thought for the presumed hierarchies across the forms.

Following my period of study at the RCA, I had something of a hiatus from the medium, primarily motivated by a growing interest in conceptual and post-conceptual art practices which were less focussed on film, in an effort to give myself a more solid grounding and broader perspective. Despite this break, I was gradually drawn back to the form, through my interest in other artists' work and the inherent potential of experimental film. I started to make films again, primarily focussed on place and the city, with some mixed results. The works were, generally, formally well realised but the underpinning ideas were less sound and none of those works feature here. However, I persevered and, over the course of the last few years, I have been ever more productive, recently thinking it would be useful to draw the key works together. This was in the hope that, in reappraisal, lines of convergence and divergence might emerge across the skein of the collected practice.

Through this process, patterns have become apparent. Firstly, there is a recurring utilisation of two filmmaking modes: phantom rides and moving panoramas. Phantom rides were an early genre of film, shot at the front of trains with the camera mounted to the front of the vehicle so that they captured the motion of the train as it progressed along the track. When projected these films would create the illusion of riding at the front of the train. Moving panoramas work slightly differently in that, whilst still photographed from a train, the camera is mounted as if looking out of a passenger window, capturing a panorama of the landscape.² Both techniques are utilised across a selection of the works presented here and, where they are employed, they document landscape in a way that is a central structuring element of the artwork. For example, in *Deansgate–Cornbrook*, where a moving panorama technique is utilised, the panorama is the primary structural device of the film. The determination of the camera movement, by the transport vehicle, also appealed to me in reducing the requirement for formal or stylistic decisions.

Formal linguistics is another area of recurring exploration. Linguistic structure, in particular rhyme structures that employ a single phoneme change across rhyme patterns, had appealed to me since I became interested in structuralist approaches to language.³ This interest subsequently led me to explore the field of formal linguistics, primarily through the lens of Russian Formalism and practitioners such as Roman Jakobson, whose work had influenced the development of structuralism.⁴ Initially, I was interested in the basic relationship between a word and the thing it represented. However, I then started to play with language itself, emphasising its formal properties through rhyme and exploring

phonetic slippage across words.⁵

The collection broadly spans the period from 2021 through to 2025 but, it's important to note, many of the works were originally filmed and edited earlier than this, going back to 2015, and were subsequently presented in various guises, in exhibition spaces and within lecture formats, as works-in-progress. The majority of the films remained unfinished for some time and it is only more recently that I was able to return to them and complete them. In collecting the works, I struggled to decide upon a title, going through two or three different iterations in the process of collating the films. In the end, 'Natural Systems', the working title of a film I was developing, appealed to me. That film is a forward-looking work, acting as a signpost to future practice.

1. See Al Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (1999. London: BFI Publishing). This is Rees' key work in the field and many of the works he screened in the film seminars feature in the book.

2. There has been extensive engagement with the origins of these modes of filmmaking in academia and adjacent artistic fields over the course of the last twenty years. See Les Roberts, *A Cinematic Geography of Liverpool* (2012. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press) and Patrick Keiller, *A View from the Train: Cities and Other Landscapes* (2014. London: Verso). Further, I noted at a recent re-release screening of Michael Haneke's classic feature film, *Hidden*, that he employs a phantom ride filming technique to great effect. This may have influenced me, bearing in mind its original release date in 2005, and the impact of the film on me.

3. To note, here I mean a structuralism that also enfolds poststructuralism, as a continuation and development of structuralism.

4. I recently found the following quote in an old notebook, relating to this practice, and felt it would be useful in situating the works. See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*. 2nd edn. (1997. Oxford: Blackwell), p.85: 'Jakobson's influence can be detected everywhere within Formalism, Czech Structuralism and modern linguistics. What he contributed, in particular to poetics, which he regarded as part of the field of linguistics, was the idea that the "poetic" consisted above all in language's being placed in a certain kind of self-conscious relationship to itself. The poetic functioning of language "promotes the palpability of signs," draws attention to their material qualities rather than simply using them as counters in communication.'

5. Much of Bruce Nauman's practice focusses on the abstraction of words, removing them from their relational network of meaning, through an emphasis on their formal properties. I feel sure that Al Rees had shown works by Nauman in his film seminars and so I had spent some time with that practice. A work such as *Lip Sync* (1969) is an interesting example and can be easily found online.

Films



Natural Systems
(2025) 4'28"

Dictionaries have always appealed to me, not only as printed objects with their high-quality typesetting but also for what they represent: the synchronic network of language in a material form. This film opens with a series of dictionary definitions paired with corresponding objects in a rural landscape. Gradually, the definitions and what is seen on screen start to shift, with the introduction of the perceptual faculty: the seeing of other things in these forms. A sequence of linguistic and spatial intersections is presented, across the landscape of the Cheshire plain.



Gardening
(2024) 1'40"

This work explores themes of similitude, resemblance and scale through photo-realistic geographical imaginings. The film was created as a part of a broader project that investigated the perceptual faculty: the seeing of images in objects and abstract forms. For example, a child might find a leftover wood-cutting and imagine a building or a vehicle, inhabiting a micro landscape, according to the games that they play. In the film, the micro (the peeling paint on a garden wall) and the macro (the forms of island land masses) are positioned along a single projection, in the imagining of place.



Field Works
(2023) 2'26"

Field Works was photographed in the foothills of the Peak District and represents something of a departure from the previous works, being shot in a rural rather than urban environment. It is another work which explores phonetic slippage and the relationship between an object and a word. The final part of the film is a simple slippage between the words 'field' and 'fold'. 'Field' relates directly to the image onscreen whereas 'fold' refers to the phrase 'folding the sheep', a historic farming practice where sheep are systematically moved across the land and enclosed in temporary pens called folds, where they are left to graze on the land and enrich the soil with their manure.



Deansgate-Cornbrook
(2022) 2'37"

Deansgate-Cornbrook is part of a series of works that explore the basic formal units of language, the phoneme, through linguistic slippage. The film documents a journey between two Manchester tram stops in a moving panorama. During the journey a linguistic game is played: as the film begins, the word 'Deansgate' is shown in the lower half of the screen, at Deansgate tram stop. A series of slippages then occurs across the journey, with the phonemes of the words gradually transmogrifying to the final tram stop name, Cornbrook. A linguistic trajectory is traced through the space of the city: the confluence of poetics and place.



Ford-Ford
(2022) 2'12"

Ford-Ford is a further development of a series of film works which explore the confluence of language and place across the course of a journey. Here, it is a car journey through a suburb of Manchester. The film differs from the others with the prominent inclusion of a car radio, captured incidentally whilst filming. This audio, a radio play and a segment from a rock song, added another symbolic layer to the outcome and so, after some deliberation, I decided to keep the sound in, rather than re-shoot. The phonetic slippages that are presented occasionally connect to the radio audio whilst also connecting to what we see on the road, along the journey.



Wales—Ireland
(2023) 3'29"

Moving panoramas and phantom ride filming techniques have been a recurring element of my practice. These films were all shot on trains and ferries on a journey across South Wales and southern Ireland. Like the earlier films I had photographed on public transport, the works centre on the idea that the movement of the vehicle through space would be a primary structuring device of the film. Hence, the journeys were shot and only then was the structure and meaning of the films unfolded. This broadly relates to an idea I had previously explored: the extent to which the spatial forms of the environment could determine the temporal and structural forms of a film work.

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Thanks to Manchester School of Art, The Digital Imaging Suite (LJMU), Screenworks Journal, Cheshire East council, Canal and River Trust, TFL and TFGM.

